

THE PRESENCE OF NATURE

December 14, 1978 - January 17, 1979

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART  
DOWNTOWN BRANCH



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The American landscape has long been a source of inspiration for artists who have celebrated its physical beauty and fertility, as well as a supplier of pigments for painters and wood for sculptors, most often obtained indirectly through artists' supply stores and lumberyards. A recent development is the act of using the land directly for sculpture. Paralleling the "back to nature" movement that spread through the country, earthwork artists manipulated the land. Large-scale projects altered or relocated sections of earth with little concern for portability, public access, or marketability.

The artists in this present exhibition also venture into nature, but return its materials to their studios where manipulation occurs by hand and not heavy machinery. The intent to preserve their natural appearance is carried through in simple acts of manipulation that do not impair the surface of the materials. Logs, branches, and twigs, for instance, still retain an unmistakable identity in Rosemarie Castoro's Beaver's Trap and Harriet Feigenbaum's Philadelphia Pentagon. Some works are the result of a single process that has been applied to the natural objects. Binding is common to many of the works but is most apparent in Jackie Winsor's Bound Logs and Sarah Draney's Leaning Bound Stick Piece #4. References to traditional women's work, sewing, weaving, and craft-like procedures are implied, yet these women suffer no intimidation in the handling of cumbersome objects. For Jackie Winsor, binding involves the repetitious and tedious work of securing and tightening two nine-foot logs together in four massive balls of hemp. Sarah Draney's is a more delicate treatment of securing colored threads to individual sticks. Martin Puryear, in Some Lines for Jim Beckwourth, twists long thongs of rawhide that make the small tufts of hair spread out like ink lines on absorbent paper.

Other works are the result of processes that occur in nature. Alan Sonfist's Cracked Earth Paintings, where mud has been troweled over the surface of the canvas, are indeed meant to crack. In the 10 years since they were made the mud has cracked and separated to create an all-over pattern of webs and lines. In a sense, these paintings continually create themselves through time. Ironically, they preserve their disintegration. Rudolph Montanez's Clover Leaf, on the other hand, is designed to have a patch of clover grow into a preformed iconic shape. A syphon hidden inside the pedestal transports a continual supply of water to the aluminum armature, and special grow lights hasten the natural growth toward an unnatural image.

Large-scale enclosures by three of the women are formed by the placement or arrangement of individual branches. Harriet Feigenbaum's Philadelphia Pentagon is constructed of naturally curved branches used as posts and uniformly sized branches as walls joined at each juncture with wire bows. Quirky-shaped stumps of a razed forest take on humorous personalities of

their own. One could almost say that Patsy Norvell's Expansion Circle was drawn instead of built. Long, thin sticks, like lines, are cross-hatched at a chosen width to determine the size of the circle. The piece is first woven on the floor, and then raised and joined with fine wires. Rosemarie Castoro's Beaver Trap is another fence-like enclosure, where pointed spears of different sizes are balanced to look planted rather than placed. Ambiguities of meaning and intention are part of the piece and its title: Castoro in Italian means beaver.

Representational works by other artists are inspired by memories of, and a personal involvement with nature. Deborah Butterfield's Small Dark Fork Horse grows out of a love for horses as well as the land. Looking as though it was born out of the land itself, sticks supply its bones, and mud, its skin. While its awkward stance upon six legs recalls the trials of a newly-born colt, its weatherbeaten appearance assumes age, experience, even wisdom. The use of the earth implies a similar wisdom in the rock books of Michelle Stuart. Kept closed and unreadable, we know their subjects by their "titles" of rocks and feathers. Real titles refer us not only to places of visitation by the artist (Salinas; Raritan River, New Jersey) but to the literal origins of the books whose pages have been rubbed with earth from those regions. As histories of earth, their knowledge is secret and unarticulated, yet communicated. Alan Sonfist reconstructs the frozen pond where he used to ice skate as a child. By laying canvas below fallen leaves, he is able to capture their own arrangement in encaustic, a hard wax medium traditionally used by artists to hold pigments to a surface. One feels the urge to touch the surface to see if these really are Leaves Frozen in Time. Small jewel-like configurations by Marilyn Gelfman-Pereira allude to representation without actually being so. To geometric forms of welded monel, twigs extend an organic quality, where these shapes have been trapped below a woven grid of spruce or appear as extensions of an insect-like stem. Another provides the missing half to willow cones sewn with cotton thread.

All of these works are beset by irony that occurs when art and nature are directly involved with each other. The collection of these materials from the natural environment imply a separation from their origins which is their source of life. Branches are sawed from their trunks, and trunks from their roots; yet, these artists take special care to preserve these materials as they have been found. And while the materials in the works are identifiable as themselves, their forms refer to an imagery that could only have been man-made. Where works are of mud or clover, the artist's hand is there at the beginning to shape the sod or trowel the mud. In this delicate balance between art and nature, man is the fulcrum.

Cindy Schwab

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

All dimensions are in inches unless otherwise specified

1. DEBORAH BUTTERFIELD  
Small Dark Fork Horse (Brown Mud and Sticks-Smooth), 1978  
Steel armature, chicken wire, sticks, wire, mud, paper pulp, dextrine, plaster and fiberglass shreds  
32 x 38 x 13  
Collection Mr. Alfred Ordovery
2. ROSEMARIE CASTORO  
Beaver's Trap, 1978  
Carved wood branches  
85 x 153 x 144  
Courtesy Hal Bromm Gallery and Tibor de Nagy Gallery
3. SARAH DRANEY  
Green Sound Skin, 1973  
Skin, sticks and acrylic  
60 x 24  
Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery
4. Leaning Bound Stick Piece #4, 1973  
Sticks and thread  
84 x 5  
Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery
5. HARRIET FEIGENBAUM  
Philadelphia Pentagon, 1978  
Branches and wire  
9'5" x 10'd.  
Lent by the artist
6. MARILYNN GELFMAN-PEREIRA  
22-78, 1977  
Monel, copper wire and spruce  
5 x 13 3/4 x 9 1/4  
Courtesy O.K. Harris Works of Art
7. 9-78, 1978  
24 ga. monel and ficus  
6 1/2 x 16 1/4 x 7  
Courtesy O.K. Harris Works of Art
8. 35-78, 1978  
24 ga. monel, willow and cotton thread  
4 1/2 x 11 1/4 x 7 3/4  
Courtesy O.K. Harris Works of Art
9. RUDOLPH MONTANEZ  
Clover Leaf, 1978  
Clover and soil  
54 x 48 x 48  
Lent by the artist
10. PATSY NORVELL  
Expansion Circle, 1975  
Sticks and wire  
6'8" x 10'd.  
Lent by the artist
11. Friday Harbor Fence, 1975  
Rabbit bones and wire  
3 x 29d.  
Lent by the artist
12. MARTIN PURYEAR  
Some Lines for Jim Beckwourth, 1978  
Twisted rawhide (6 thongs)  
22 x 12'6" - 22'10"  
Lent by the artist
13. ALAN SONFIST  
Leaves Frozen in Time, 1969  
Leaves and encaustic on canvas  
48 x 48  
Lent by the artist
14. Cracked Earth Painting, 1967  
Dried earth on canvas  
44 x 32  
Lent by the artist
15. Cracked Earth Painting, 1967  
Dried earth on canvas  
44 x 32  
Lent by the artist

CHECKLIST continued

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| <p>16. MICHELLE STUART<br/><u>Raritan River, New Jersey, 1977</u><br/>Earth, muslin mounted rag paper,<br/>rock, string and cloth<br/>4 x 7 1/2 x 8<br/>Courtesy Droll/Kolbert Gallery</p> <p>17. <u>Wind Book, 1977-1978</u><br/>Earth, muslin mounted rag paper<br/>and feather<br/>1 1/2 x 10 x 13<br/>Courtesy Droll/Kolbert Gallery</p> | <p>18. <u>Salinas, 1977</u><br/>Earth from Salinas, California,<br/>feather, string and muslin<br/>mounted rag paper<br/>1/2 x 6 1/2 x 8 1/2<br/>Lent by the artist</p> <p>19. JACKIE WINSOR<br/><u>Bound Logs, 1972-1973</u><br/>Wood and hemp<br/>114 x 29 x 18<br/>Whitney Museum of American Art;<br/>Gift of the Howard and Jean Lipman<br/>Foundation, Inc.</p> |
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THE PRESENCE OF NATURE was organized by the following Helena Rubinstein Fellows in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program: Amy Benenson, Vassar College; Gayle Davis, Michigan State University; Pam Gruninger, Dartmouth College; Laurence Lyon, University of Michigan; and Cindy Schwab, Carnegie-Mellon University; with the assistance of other Fellows in the Program: Cynthia Lee, University of California, Irvine; Mathew McClain, University of Cincinnati; Yancey Perkinson, Southern Methodist University; and Leslie Yudell, Columbia University.

The Downtown Branch of the Whitney Museum of American Art is operated under the direction of David Hupert, Head of the Museum's Education Department and Lisa Phillips, Branch Manager.

The Downtown Branch, located at 55 Water Street, is supported by the business community of lower Manhattan and the National Endowment for the Arts. The museum is open Monday through Friday from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Admission is free.